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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0890
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2433
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2749
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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: MUSLIM ACTIVIST STRUGGLES TO TURN GRAND IDEAS
INTO CASH, COMRADES AND CONCRETE

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Murat Telibekov, a Kazakhstani Muslim activist and president of three NGOs, is never short on grand ideas, and most of them involve the U.S. Embassy. His newest idea is to build Islamic centers in Astana and Almaty, and he is looking to the U.S. Ambassador and American Muslims to help him. He would also like to build the first American-Kazakhstani mosque, and he is counting on the Ambassador's presence at the ground-breaking as the necessary impetus to get the project going. In June, his idea was to host a series of round-tables on the Iranian elections, and he wanted Iran's presidential candidate Khussein Mussavi and former president Khatami to participate, with the U.S. Embassy covering the expenses for the two leaders' travel to Kazakshtan. And in May, Telibekov announced to the press that he reached agreement with Sacha Baron Cohen, the director of the "Borat" movie, to film another movie about Kazakhstan. END SUMMARY.

3. (SBU) On August 13, an article entitled "The U.S. Campaign to Build Islamic Centers in Kazakhstan" appeared on the Internet news website zona.kz. The article printed a press release from the Kazakhstani-American Organization for Cooperation (KAOC), which announced that a campaign has started in the United States to collect money to build Islamic centers in Almaty and Astana. According to the release, businessmen, religious leaders, and political activists were involved, and Tucson prisoners sent a letter to the KAOA expressing their wish to contribute money to the project. The Union of Muslims of Kazakhstan and the Muslim Committee on Human Rights in Central Asia were actively participating in the initiative, said the press release.

4. (SBU) Blindsided but intrigued, we contacted the chairman of the KAOA, Murat Telibekov. We found that the project is still very much in the idea stage, and Telibekov is betting on U.S. Embassy support to move it forward. Telibekov is also the chairman of the Union of Muslims of Kazakhstan and the Muslim Committee on Human Rights, and his combined staff is three people. The KAOA was established in March of this year, and Telibekov's U.S. counterpart is an American Muslim from Atlanta, Khassan Kamal, whom Telibekov met when he went to the United States on an IVLP in 2007. Telibekov told us on August 14 that Kamal is raising funds for the project with Muslim organizations in the United States, supposedly including the "Muslim

Observer" newspaper and the Islamic Center of Maryland. He claimed that he also had the support of Congressman Keith Ellison, a representative from Minnesota and the first Muslim elected to U.S. Congress. His idea is to build two Islamic centers, in Astana and Almaty, each with a prayer house, a press center, and a tennis court. He was vague on the operational details, such as the goal of the centers, who would use them, how they would be financed, or even where in each city they would be located. Nevertheless, he told us he wants to hold ground-breaking ceremonies for the centers in October, and would like the Ambassador to attend, because, he believes, the Ambassador's participation would help attract financing and support from local businesses and the authorities.

15. (SBU) Telibekov's projects tend to be grand ideas, but ones that are fuzzy on details and implementation strategies. He recently proposed a similar idea -- to build a Kazakhstan-American mosque, either here or in Almaty. He told us in July that he has picked the sites for the mosques, but the project has not progressed much further. Much like the centers, the fund-raising was supposed to be done by his American counterpart, Khasan Kamal. Here again, his strategy was to have the Ambassador attend the ground-breaking with the hope that support from the authorities and businesses will follow. He formally invited the Ambassador to participate in the ground-breaking. At the time, we thought the project was rather nebulous and wanted to see it develop further before committing the Ambassador to participate.

16. (SBU) In June, Telibekov approached us with yet another idea to host a series of TV shows and press conferences on the Iranian elections. He wanted Iran's presidential candidate Khussein Mussavi and former president Khatami to participate, and he wanted the U.S. Embassy to invite the two leaders and to cover their travel expenses

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to Kazakhstan. The round-tables would have included Kazakhstani political leaders, political scientists, as well as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan (SAMK), which was surprising, because Telibekov has frequently criticized the SAMK as corrupt. (NOTE: When we contacted the SAMK about this project, the Deputy Chief Mufti called Telibekov a "swindler" and told us the SAMK would never support any of his endeavors. END NOTE.) Telibekov's proposed topic list of discussion for these round-tables was ambitious, to say the least - aside from Iranian elections, he also wanted to discuss North Korea's nuclear program, the war in the Caucasus, the fight against drug-trafficking in Afghanistan, and Turkey's EU membership. The funding for this project would have come exclusively from the U.S. Embassy.

17. (SBU) Telibekov has a talent for media relations, but his statements can sometimes get ahead of reality. In May, he publicly claimed to have reached an agreement with Sacha Baron Cohen, of "Borat" fame, to film another movie about Kazakhstan. He told the press that it would be a sci-fi movie set in Almaty, with a cast that includes Kazakhstan's political and business leaders, and a plot line that revolves around the excavated pit on the city's main square. The working title of the film was "A Saga About a Kazakhstani Pit." Telibekov claimed to have sent a letter to the Akimat (city administration) with the request to stop filling the pit; the Akimat denied receiving such a request.

18. (SBU) BIO NOTE: Murat Telibekov is a native of Almaty, and a professor at Central Asian University, a private institution in Almaty, where he teaches classes on labor safety and environmental protection. He is the founder and chairman of three NGOs -- the Muslim Committee for Human Rights, the Union of Kazakhstani Muslims, and, most recently, the Kazakhstani-American Cooperation Organization. He is a prolific writer and claims to have authored over 500 articles on culture, religion, and politics. He founded his organizations with the expressed goal of "consolidating various Muslim organizations and uniting Muslims in solving urgent social and spiritual problems in society," although to date his organizations do not have many members. Telibekov has strained relations with the official Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), whom he has frequently criticized for corruption.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Telibekov is never short of ideas, although we are not sure that he or his organizations have the necessary wherewithal or credibility to implement them. Visionaries are not always good managers. We'll keep watch for Telibekov's next grand -- and entertaining - idea. END COMMENT.

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